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SMALL CHURCHES CONSULTATION CALLS FOR NEW APPROACHES

by H. Boone Porter

BUCKEYSTOWN, Md. -- The long-standing flow of population from rural to urban areas has now been reversed. The wide-spread practice of having two or more small churches served by one clergyman leads to deterioration of every measurable aspect of church life. These were two of the positions presented to the recent International Planning Consultation on the Small/Rural Church which would call for drastic changes in the prevailing strategies of the Episcopal Church and of other major religious bodies.

Twenty leaders of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada met together with half a dozen authorities on rural church life in England. The English delegation, headed by the Rev. Canon Anthony Russell of the Arthur Rank Centre near Coventry, included four Anglicans and two Methodists, their two churches being the only ones widely represented in small towns and rural areas throughout England.

The Rt. Rev. William J. Cox, Assistant Bishop of Oklahoma, and chairman of the Episcopal Church Standing Commission on the Church in Small Communities, presided.

North American participants included members of the Standing Commission, representatives of the Leadership Academy for New Directions, a team of two rural sociologists from the University of Minnesota, and others.

British speakers gave presentations on British rural life today, agriculture, and the village church. The latter, among both Anglicans and Methodists, has suffered severe cut-backs of professional personnel. One clergyman must now often serve several small churches.

Meanwhile, in Great Britain as in the United States and Canada, many formerly dwindling villages and their churches are being infused with new life as increasing numbers of people choose to move from urban to rural areas as places of residence.

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Members of the consultation were informed that in all western industrial nations today, and also in Japan, the former exodus of rural people into the large cities has generally slowed down or been balanced off, and in many areas the migration into the non-metropolitan sector is now greater. The larger number of non-farm people now in rural areas has reduced farmers to a minority, yet their place is uniquely important because without them the pattern of local rural life would not exist.

American presentations included accounts of regional programs in northeastern Vermont, Washington County in Maryland, and the northeastern end of the diocese of East Carolina, in which small and formerly struggling mission churches have recovered their vitality by the training of lay leadership, the use of non-stipendiary clergy, and other appropriate steps.

Considerable attention was given to Dr. Randolph Cantrell and Dr. James Krile of the University of Minnesota who outlined conclusions from extensive current research on rural and small town churches in their state. As may be expected, in many cases, two or three such churches, of all denominations, were "yoked" -- that is, served by one pastor. Yoking was found in every case to diminish measurable activity, vitality, and lay leadership. The study involved comparing yoked and nonyoked churches of similar size and circumstance, and cases where formerly independent churches were yoked and vice versa. In most cases, activity diminished rapidly with greater distance of the pastor's office from a church building. It is anticipated that such findings, if corroborated in other geographic areas, may cause consternation among church officials who have historically assumed that so-called yoking would be a helpful arrangement.

The International Consultation was sponsored by two agencies in America, and two in England: The Episcopal Church's Standing Commission on the Church in Small Communities, the Resource Center for Small Churches, Luling, Tex., the Arthur Rank Centre (National Agricultural Centre), Warwickshire, and the Centre for the Study of Rural Society of the Bishop Grossesteste College in Lincoln.

The rural environment of Claggett Conference Center near Frederick, Md., was the setting for the consultation.

Preceding the consultation, the British visitors were invited to the meeting of the Standing Commission on Sept. 22. Following the consultation on Sept. 27, they were taken to Washington County, Md., to meet members of small churches currently operated by lay leaders and local clergy ordained under Canon 8.

It is anticipated that a subsequent consultation will be held, probably in England.

